

# ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** October 10, 2013

**Agenda Item:** Emergency deer season adjustments in Region 4 due to EHD

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Approval of Final Rule

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 15 minutes

## **Background**

Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) is a common and somewhat chronic disease of white-tailed deer in Montana. The disease is transmitted by biting flies (midges). The disease is seasonal, occurring in late summer/fall, and outbreaks conclude with the mortality of flies with the first killing frost. Minor outbreaks occur in Regions 4-7, almost annually. These outbreaks do not typically affect sufficient numbers of animals to warrant any season changes. This year, EHD mortality has been observed in Regions 5, 6, and 7, varying across the landscape in a spotty fashion, at low to moderate levels in some areas. Here again, changes in harvest management are not warranted.

White-tailed deer in the Missoula Valley in Region 2 are experiencing a substantial, epizootic (epidemic) event. Lab results are not yet available, but symptoms are consistent with EHD infection. A minimum of 190 deer have died. If confirmed, this die-off will be the first known epizootic event from EHD in Region 2. The affected population is in the valley, on the western edge of Missoula. The area is within HD 260 which is a narrow HD that encompasses the urban/valley area. Deer harvest regulations are liberal to address an array of conflicts and deer populations remain robust in the remainder of the HD. There is no need for hunting season adjustments in HD 260.

White-tailed deer in the portion of Region 4 from Great Falls, to the north, are experiencing EHD mortality at epizootic (epidemic) levels. Over much of the area, where white-tailed deer are normally common and numerous, deer are now scarce. Mortality to date is 50% or more. Here again, white-tailed deer harvest regulations have been liberal with the objective of reducing abundance to minimize conflicts. Adjustments to white-tailed deer harvest opportunities are not suggested. However, staff are concerned that the tremendous drop in white-tailed deer hunting opportunity might result in substantial increases in mule deer doe harvests as hunters transfer effort to antlerless mule deer. FWP proposes replacing the either-sex, mule deer general hunting opportunity with antlered buck hunting in HD's 400, 401, 403, 404, and 406.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results**

Given the emergency nature of this change, and the start of the general season on October 26, it is necessary and appropriate to take final action at the October 10 meeting. Public comment will only be taken at that meeting. FWP initiated efforts to inform the public of this proposal early in the process.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

The change may be adopted as proposed, with adjustment, with additions, with deletions or no change from current regulations (status quo) as per staff justifications, public comment and/or Commission discussion.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

Given the observed mortality and measured decline of the white-tailed deer population, along with anticipated, adverse impacts to local mule deer populations, FWP proposes and supports the changes.

## **Proposed Motion**

I move the FW Commission adopt the emergency adjustments to deer seasons, as presented by FWP.